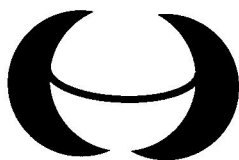


KONINKLIJK INSTITUUT  
VOOR TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

## MEMORIES OF 'THE EAST'

Abstracts of the Dutch interviews about  
the Netherlands East Indies, Indonesia and  
New Guinea (1930-1962) in the  
Oral History Project Collection

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## Introduction

Between 1997 and 2001 an extensive series of Dutch language interviews were recorded in order to document 'the end of the Netherlands colonial presence in Asia'. A Foundation for the Oral History of Indonesia (SMGI, Stichting Mondelinge Geschiedenis Indonesië), specifically established for this purpose, organised and conducted 1,189 interview sessions with 724 people, concentrating on their experiences in the Dutch East Indies, Indonesia and New Guinea during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Since May 2001 the collection has been available for consultation at the Royal Institute of Linguistics and anthropology or KITLV in Leiden, with the exception of the interviews with eight people that are under embargo for ten years.

This volume contains translations of the unpublished abstracts of each interview so that both Dutch and non-Dutch speakers can have some idea of the scale and character of the collection. The purpose of this introduction is to assist in aim this by providing the necessary context. First the background and organisation of the project are summarised; this is followed by comments on the selection of candidates for interviews and issues of oral history. Finally, the interviews themselves and the relevant documentation generated by the project are described. An alphabetical list of interviewees is presented at the end of this volume.

### *Why choose an oral history project?*

In 1995 a group of historians and anthropologists involved in Indonesian studies in the Netherlands joined an initiative by Heather Sutherland to create an oral history project, in order to preserve the stories and life-descriptions of those who had lived through the turbulent late colonial and early post-colonial period. Time was running out. The number of people who had first hand knowledge of this era was declining. Preserving their stories would provide a new body of information, supplementary to the written record, containing details of daily life and personal perspectives, directly narrated by the living voice of individual experience.

It was decided not to focus the project on a specific research question, but rather to concentrate on the collection of stories in order to form an archive that could be used for many purposes, including future scholarly work on diverse themes. In the Dutch context, this was fairly unique. Although there had been various small-scale efforts, usually conducted by individual researchers, only at the University of Nijmegen a large-scale project was undertaken since 1978. This was to preserve oral accounts relevant to the history of the Roman Catholic mission; these are preserved in the Catholic Documentation Centre (*Katholiek Documentatie Centrum*). The Netherlands has clearly lagged behind such countries as the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Australia, the United States and Singapore in recognising the potential of systematically collected oral sources.

### *The project*

Although it was broadly conceived, the project was not completely open ended, but focused on the question: what was life like in the final decades of Dutch colonialism and during the first years of Indonesian independence? In practical terms, the interviews were structured by the radical changes that characterised the period. Since the respondents generally shared a colonial perspective, the following sequence depicts the framework typical of the individual accounts.

Until 1940 Dutch society in the Indies was largely unaware of the emerging nationalist aspirations of the colonized. At that time the shadow of war was hanging over the mother country and the colony itself was facing a growing threat from Japan. In May 1940 the colony was abruptly cut off from the motherland when Germany occupied the Netherlands. A Japanese attack was imminent, and preparations for the struggle ahead were made in the Netherlands Indies. The invasion finally occurred in the early months of 1942, and the resulting occupation lasted until the Japanese surrender in August 1945. Many Dutch and Indo-European men were immediately made prisoners of war, but in the course of the occupation increasing numbers of both Dutch and Indo-Europeans were interned. The capitulation of Japan, and the Indonesian declaration of independence two days later, marked the beginning of the Indonesia-Netherlands conflict. The first few months following the birth of the Republic of Indonesia became infamous among the Dutch as the 'Bersiap' period, the name deriving from the cry of 'bersiap', (get ready!), shouted by Indonesian youth groups when attacking.

Between 1945 and 1949, more than 100,000 soldiers were sent to the Netherlands Indies from the Netherlands to defend Dutch interests. The conflict was partially resolved in December 1949 with the transfer of sove

reignty to Indonesia, but the unresolved status of New Guinea continued to be a problem. The Netherlands retained the territory, even though Indonesia viewed it as a lawful part of its new state. The question inevitably affected Indonesian attitudes towards the Dutch, and towards the continuing strong role of Dutch business in Indonesia during the 1950s. The prevailing hostility forced many Indo-Europeans to leave to make a new life in the Netherlands and, after Dutch businesses were nationalized in 1957/1958, the Dutch presence in Asia had been whittled down to New Guinea. After the threat of armed conflict at the beginning of the 1960s and the exertion of international pressure, in 1962 New Guinea was transferred to the United Nations (UN-TEA). The latter handed New Guinea to Indonesia in 1963, and within a year the Dutch colonial presence in Asia was relegated to the realm of history.

This 'outline' of events provided the rough historical map structuring the organisation of interviews, and underlies the historical perspective of the people interviewed. Respondents were sought among those who had lived in the Netherlands Indies, Indonesia or New Guinea during that period, and who were, for practical reasons, living in the Netherlands or within a reasonable travelling distance at the end of the 1990s. This limited radius of action thus restricted the collection: for example, it does not contain the stories of those who later journeyed to the United States, or Australia, or New Zealand, nor does it cover those who continued to live in Indonesia. It is true that a few interviews were recorded in Indonesia, but this number is far too small to be significant. Within the feasible geographical scope (the Netherlands and Belgium), a search was made to find a population that was as varied as possible: 'full blood' Dutch people (the so-called *Belanda Totok*), Indo-Europeans, Chinese, Moluccans, Menadonese, *Belanda Hitam*, Javanese and so forth.

### *Representativeness*

There was never any question that the collection would try to be statistically representative. It was clear from the outset that it was not possible to create a balanced quantitative reproduction of the population which came to the Netherlands from the colony, for the simple reason that approximately half a century had elapsed since decolonization. We were therefore unable to interview people who would already have been middle aged or older at the end of the War, so most holders of senior positions in the colony were no longer alive. However, the importance of demographic statistical representativeness to a project like this is open to question. Often the value of an interview lies more in the extent to which it contains material not available from other sources, or in the emotional power and graphic description conveyed by the

narrative. For this project we chose to give priority to three categories of informants which are relatively poorly documented. The first group consisted of people who had remained outside the camps during the Japanese occupation; the second was made up of soldiers, police, and members of the security services; while the third comprised people who could give information about the business world and labour relations. Within these categories there was still sufficient room to aspire to 'qualitative representativeness', to try and obtain stories from a spread of social levels and regions. So it was not just the director of a business who was interviewed, but also the secretary and the workers on the shop floor, or a national serviceman and the wife of a KNIL soldier rather than just high-ranking officers.

The process of collection building was subject to regular monitoring. Members of the board, external advisors, coordinator and interviewers met three to four times a year in various combinations, to evaluate and reflect upon the interviews which had already been held. These were crucial gatherings because new nuances in the interviews could be discussed and new emphases and approaches could be incorporated into the next phase. On several occasions, these sessions resulted in the definition of new sub-target groups and campaigns to recruit specific types of respondents.

### *Life histories*

Oral sources create 'living' history. The interview, the ultimate source for future research, is the outcome of an interaction between interviewer and interviewee. In this project, a core group of eleven interviewers from various disciplinary backgrounds (see below) formed the basic team. Differences in the interviewers' backgrounds (including those of age and gender) combined with the variety of respondents to ensure a broad spectrum of nuances and story lines. Because of the diversity of the interview team, and the loosely structured nature of the interview, the collection is far from monolithic.

A great deal of ink has been spilled on the role of memory in oral history. In this project the interviews have the character of life-stories rather than standardized question-and-answer sessions. The aim was to remain as close as possible to the priorities and perceptions the interviewees attributed to their own life narrative, although gentle guidance and the occasional question were used when necessary to move the story forward or clarify specific points. This helped stimulate the memory, and revive forgotten anecdotes, and also had the advantage of minimising 'fossilized stories', general reflections or retrospectively imposed political correctness.

Interviews never take place in isolation. Themes and emphases in the stories are coloured by present day news and context. Contemporary events that

reminded interviewees of their time in Asia included the visit to the Netherlands by the Emperor and Empress of Japan in May 2000 as well as television images of destruction and violence. Examples of the latter were the fireworks disaster in Enschede (East Netherlands) in which a whole residential quarter was destroyed, which took place at much the same time as the Japanese visit, while images of the bloody conflicts in the Moluccas revived memories of the 'Bersiap' period. In 1999 a large-scale investigation into the Netherlands' ungenerous reception of those 'repatriated' from the Indies was accompanied by much debate, including discussion of possible compensation for the victims of the Japanese occupation.

These events revived bitterness about the Dutch government's treatment of people from the East Indies both before and after their arrival in the Netherlands. Moreover, conscripts who had been sent to Indonesia between 1945 and 1949 felt that the Dutch authorities had abandoned them when it was suggested that perhaps the Netherlands should apologise to the Indonesian government for military actions in 1945-49. Former soldiers felt that they were once again being saddled with the role of villains.

### *The interviews and their documentation*

As was stated earlier, the trajectory of collection formation was regularly reviewed and subject to adjustment. Unfortunately the project was unable to interview all those who were prepared to be interviewed, selection was necessary. Candidates were asked to fill in a form giving background information about their time in Asia, and the coordinator selected the most suitable respondents in the light of the evolving collection profile. After the prospective interviewee had been contacted by phone, the coordinator then sought the most appropriate interviewer for that respondent. Where it was possible to interview other family members, this was frequently done so the same event could be seen from different points of view. In such cases the same interviewer was usually used. Interviewers were provided with the information available to the coordinator so that they could prepare themselves. Sometimes they consulted extra literature, or contact was sought with an advisor or member of the board. Interviewers decided for themselves whether they wanted to conduct follow-up interviews with the same person; this possibility was then always discussed with the coordinator.

All interviews were recorded in mono on minidisks (120-160 minutes) with Sony MZ-R30 recording equipment. This involved the use of two clip-on microphones (ECM T140) so that the voices of both the interviewer and the interviewee were recorded. The recordings were not edited. The only form of intervention was a marking of the tracks very ten minutes or so, so

that the recording consists of ten-minute sections. No transcriptions of interviews were made, both because this would have drained resources from the primary aim of building up the collection, and also because it was felt that the voice should remain paramount. With modern technology, the old justification of transcriptions, that they improved accessibility, is no longer valid. Each respondent was also asked to select from their private collection two photographs which they felt illustrative of their story. These were scanned, and included in the collection.

After every session, interviewers wrote a summary tracing the course of the interview, and indicating where each new track begins. If a person described his or her youth either at the beginning or the end, this was given at both the beginning and end of the summary. A few biographical details of every interviewee were noted, including gender, place and date of birth and where and when they lived or worked in Indonesia. Some biographical data on family members and eventual partner were also registered so that cross-referencing within the collection as well as with other sources, might be possible, and so that basic socio-economic background of the interviewee was available. Finally, an 'abstract' was made of each session, briefly introducing each interview. All this material has been included in a digital database and can be easily searched, so that all summaries can be surveyed, leading to the identification of the summary and track in which the specific reference can be found. Since the context in the summary appears on screen, the user can immediately gain a clear impression of content. This means that the digital summaries can be used as an index and table of contents.

### *Translation of the 'Abstracts'*

As noted above, this book contains the translated abstracts, which can be seen as a brief guide to the main summaries. The summaries themselves were intended to follow the interview as closely as possible; restructuring was avoided. Consequently, the tone of the summaries varies, both because of interviewers' different writing styles, and because the individual narrative voice of the respondents has strongly influenced formulation. There are also wide variations in wealth of detail and length. The same goes for the abstracts.

In the Dutch-language documentation we have retained the 'old Indonesian spelling', and for toponyms we consulted the *Atlas van Tropische Nederland* (1938). This was because the 'old spelling' in Dutch evokes stronger associations with the colonial era than does the modern Indonesian spelling. In the translations, however, we decided to use the modern spelling to avoid confusion.

The introduction to each abstract is organised as follows. The first item is the name of the respondent, followed by the code number of the interview, in which the digit after the full stop indicates the interview session. Thus, a 1 indicates the first session, a 2 the second and so on. The next item is the interviewee's year of birth. After this is noted when the interview was held and how many minutes it lasted. This is then followed by a list of the places where, and the periods when, the person concerned was in the Netherlands Indies, Indonesia, or New Guinea. The last item to be mentioned is the profession(s) of the person being interviewed.

### *Purpose*

The reason that the abstracts have been translated and published is primarily, of course, to introduce the material to non-Dutch speakers. In this way, both the collection as a whole, and eventually individual interviews, might be selectively accessed through assistants or interpreters. Taken together the abstracts also offer an insight into the Dutch perspective on a crucial historical period, a perspective that is often neglected. This was put very succinctly by one of the translators, S. Robson, when commenting on the abstracts:

it can be observed that the majority represents a perspective that has not been much considered among historians of Indonesia from the non-Dutch academic tradition (USA, Australia). These have tended to elide the colonial period, and treat Indonesia as something that came into being only in 1945. This viewpoint traces the rise of the nationalist movement, the struggle for independence, and the vicissitudes of Indonesian political history since then. It is as if they side with the 'winners' from the beginning, and can afford to ignore other players in the historical process.

In this volume only a first introduction of what the 'other players' narrated is given.

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(coordinator)